

**James Madison University**  
**JMU Scholarly Commons**

---

MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference

Proceedings of the Tenth Annual MadRush  
Conference: Best Papers, Spring 2019

---

# From Complaisance to Collaboration: Analyzing Citizens' Motives Near Concentration and Extermination Camps During the Holocaust

Jordan Green

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/madrush>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Holocaust and Genocide Studies Commons](#)

---

Green, Jordan, "From Complaisance to Collaboration: Analyzing Citizens' Motives Near Concentration and Extermination Camps During the Holocaust" (2019). *MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference*. 1.  
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/madrush/2019/holocaust/1>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conference Proceedings at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

# From Complaisance to Collaboration:

Analyzing Citizens' Motives Near Concentration and Extermination Camps

During the Holocaust

Jordan Green

History 395

James Madison University

Spring 2018

Dr. Michael J. Galgano

The Holocaust has raised difficult questions since its end in April 1945 including how could such an atrocity happen and how could ordinary people carry out a policy of extermination against a whole race? To answer these puzzling questions, most historians look inside the Nazi Party to discern the Holocaust's inner-workings: official decrees and memos against the Jews and other *untermenschen*<sup>1</sup>, the role of the SS, and the organization and brutality within concentration and extermination camps. However, a vital question about the Holocaust is missing when examining these criteria: who was watching? Through research, the local inhabitants' knowledge of a nearby concentration camp, extermination camp or mass shooting site and its purpose was evident and widespread. Therefore, the role non-persecuted Germans and occupied peoples living near these sites played in the atrocities committed during the Holocaust was substantial. Near the concentration camps in greater Germany, the extermination camps in Poland, and in the communities of Poland and Eastern countries distant from camps, economic gain, fear, and antisemitism<sup>2</sup> were the main three motivations for the complaisance, cooperation, or collaboration with the Nazis by local civilian populations.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The German word *Untermenschen* refers to people considered racially or socially inferior.

<sup>2</sup> Hatred or hostilities towards people of the Jewish faith. The most common spelling of the term is "anti-Semitism", but this would imply there is such a term called "pro-Semitism", which there is not. Since in contemporary times the term is used to specifically discuss the hatred of the Jewish people, it will be written throughout this paper as "antisemitism", implying its sole, hateful definition and use.

<sup>3</sup> The best secondary sources used in this essay are Father Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust By Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, trans. Catherine Spencer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 To The Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996); Markus Eikel and Valentina Sivaieva, "City Mayors, Raion Chiefs and Village Elders in Ukraine, 1941-4: How Local Administrators Co-operated with the German Occupation Authorities," *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 3 (August 2014): 405-428; Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 3, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Stefan Hördler, "Before the Holocaust: Concentration Camp Lichtenburg and the Evolution of the Nazi Camp System," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 2011): 100-126; Gordon J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); Roger Moorhouse, "Beyond Belief," *History Today* 60, no. 9 (September 2010): 28-35; Leonid Rein, "Local Collaboration in the Execution of the 'Final Solution' in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 3 (December 2006): 381-409. The best primary sources used in this essay are Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and*

Since 1945, Germany, its citizens and its occupied peoples have argued over who is culpable for the crimes committed under the Nazi regime. One way to explain this blame game is to recall the signing of the Treaty of Versailles following World War I in which Germany accepted the War Guilt Clause without a choice.<sup>4</sup> The state of Germany did not want to be internationally humiliated again and therefore tried to protect itself by placing some of the blame for the Holocaust on other groups such as the Poles, the Ukrainians, etc. Conversely, in World War II's immediate aftermath, most German people blamed the leaders of the Third Reich for the horrors of the Holocaust and claimed to have neither played a part in nor to have any knowledge of the atrocities. Those who lived nearby and had contact with the Nazi camps and mass murder sites throughout German occupied lands stated this same claim. Gordon Horowitz argues Austrian witnesses following World War II claimed plausible deniability as their defense for not knowing of Nazi crimes:

He will deny anything specifically or uniquely terrible about it. He might refer to the era as one marked by prosperity and hope; or alternately, as his thoughts shift from the period immediately before the war to the harsh era—perhaps commencing in 1942 or 1943—when defeat seemed likely and the population succumbed to the direct effects of a lost war, he is likely to speak of the suffering he, or his family, or his nation faced in defeat.<sup>5</sup>

Those who had knowledge of the camps and mass graves, which according to research was almost every local within a site's vicinity, would use their own hardships experienced during the war to defend their claims of not knowing of the horrors occurring around them. However, this misconception about the nature of the Holocaust's secrecy must be dispelled.

---

*Everyday Life in Nazi Germany: An Oral History* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2005); Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, trans. Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust: The Complete Text of the Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Miriam Novitch, *Sobibor, Martyrdom and Revolt: Documents and Testimonies* (New York: Waldon Press, Inc., 1980); *Polish Witnesses to the Shoah*, conceived Marian Turski (Middlesex, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to claim full responsibility for starting World War I and for causing all of the war's devastating effects.

<sup>5</sup> Horwitz, 185.

It is evident through witness testimonies that non-Jewish citizens, both in Germany and throughout the Reich's conquered territories, were aware of the atrocities being committed against the Jewish people. Though they may have been in disbelief, many Berliners living in the heart of Nazi Germany have testified to this knowledge. For example, Ruth Hildebrand, age 30 at the outbreak of World War II, learned of the displacement of the Jews from her husband stationed at the Luftwaffe's front control center. Ruth explains how the soldiers talking to her husband only traveled as far as the gates of the camps, so she knew where the Jews were going but not of their fate.<sup>6</sup> Others such as Stefan Reuter, a German soldier in Berlin, revealed they had heard of the gassings. When asked about the plight of the Jews during the war he answered, "...one heard in communist circles that numbers of Jews were being gassed. There were these rumors, but there was no direct proof."<sup>7</sup> In fact, even if direct proof was presented to those living far from places of death, Roger Moorhouse argues that an "imagination gap" would have contributed to the people's disbelief. The citizens distant from camps would have lacked the ability to grasp both the German government's capability to facilitate such a deadly system and the human ability to carry out such horrible crimes.<sup>8</sup> Jan Karski, an underground Polish courier, made his way to England and the United States in the summer of 1943 to plea for action on behalf of the Jewish people's condition under the Nazis. United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, the only sitting Jewish Justice at that time, received Karski but could not believe his testimony and defended himself by stating, "I did not say this young man [Karski] is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. There is a difference." Whether they believed it or not, people throughout Europe and the world knew of crimes against the Jewish people even though

---

<sup>6</sup> Johnson and Reuband, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson and Reuband, 203.

<sup>8</sup> Moorhouse, 35. The remaining information and quote in this paragraph is also drawn from the same source.

they were nowhere near them. This begs the question: how could locals near concentration camps, death camps or mass shooting sites not know of the fate of the Jews? The answer is simple: they had to know, and they did know.

This knowledge can be concluded from Miriam Novitch's research on the Sobibor extermination camp, conducted throughout the 1960s-70s, which displays witness testimonies of former Sobibor inmates who escaped during the camp revolt on October 14, 1943. Many testimonies attest to the knowledge of local citizens such as Tomasz Blatt's, which states a landlady fed him after his escape and asked, "Do you come from the camp where people are burned? They are looking for you. Run, our village is only five kilometers from there."<sup>9</sup> Aizik Rottenberg stated he grew up in Wlodawa, a Polish town eight kilometers from Sobibor. While growing up, he remembers hearing Polish peasants at the market saying, "Jews, young and old, are being burned in Sobibor."<sup>10</sup> Zelda Metz grew up in a town fifty kilometers from the camp and heard rumors from other Poles that Jews came to Sobibor from all directions to die; she recalled hearing, "We see the flames of the crematoria from a distance of fifteen kilometers."<sup>11</sup> Novitch's findings prove that Poles living five, ten, fifteen, even fifty kilometers from Sobibor knew of the camp and its horrors. Since most testimonies like those documented in Novitch's research show either cooperation or collaboration in regards to antisemitic Nazi policies during World War II, it is imperative to seek out the motivations behind such behaviors. The following paragraphs provide the historical context necessary to understand where the camps and mass shooting sites were and how they evolved along with Nazi ideology, which influenced the different motivations of the locals to remain complaisant.

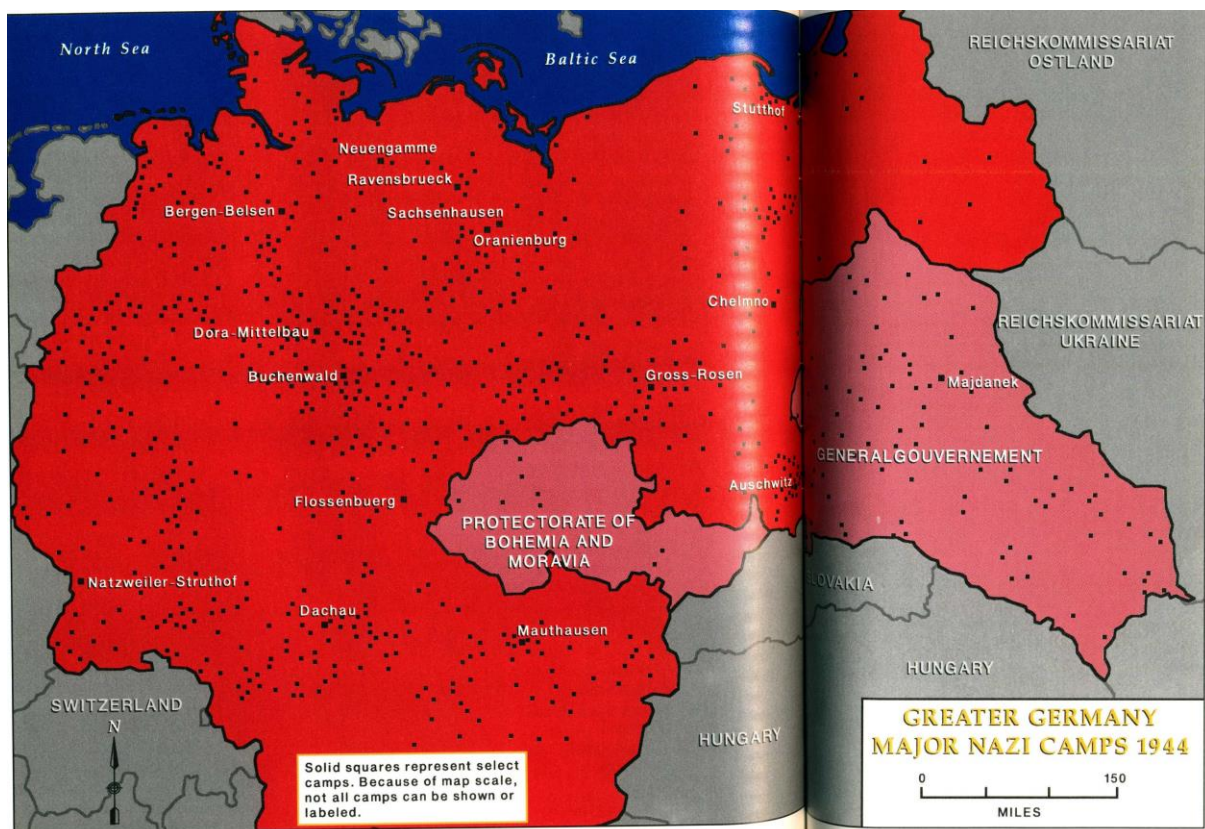
---

<sup>9</sup> Novitch, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Novitch, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Novitch, 130.

Adolf Hitler, elected Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, promptly started arresting and silencing political opposition throughout the country. The concentration camp system Nazi Germany created in 1933 held these political opponents as Hitler consolidated his totalitarian power. As the newly established “Führer” (dictator), Hitler declared certain peoples such as the Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and the disabled as inferior to the pure Aryan (German) race. From the pre-war years throughout the Second World War, these *untermenschen* were the prisoners held, tortured, and killed in the camps, which evolved over time to serve the goals of the Final Solution and German power.



This map of the camps of Greater Germany during the Holocaust can be used to reference the location of the various camps mentioned below. The same can be said for the subsequent maps of Einsatzgruppen massacres and Nazi camps in occupied Poland, Figures 2 and 3, respectively.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing USA, 1996), 138-139. The following two maps can be found in the same source on pages 51 and 45, respectively.

To justify its use of concentration camps, the Nazi government in the early 1930s dictated to the public that the camps were mainly for Communists, and that they were built not only to uphold the law, but also to rehabilitate the prisoners. Historian Sybille Steinbacher says the citizens of Dachau during this time regarded the local camp “as a legitimate, necessary institution, in which aliens of the community would have to be re-educated.”<sup>13</sup> Locals held this same sentiment near many other camps created to imprison Communists such as Lichtenburg. Lichtenburg, located in the town of Prettin in Saxony, Germany, was instrumental in the creation of the camp system. Though an already existing prison housed the camp, its administrative structure became the model for all concentration camps throughout the Reich. Lichtenburg was originally created to hold Communists and later criminals, homosexuals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Beyond its administration, Lichtenburg was known for its use as a training camp for SS officers, and its integration into the city of Prettin.<sup>14</sup> One camp in Germany based off of Lichtenburg’s model was Flossenbürg, established in the spring of 1938. The camp was created to hold “non-political” prisoners such as Gypsies and criminals and eventually foreigners once the Nazis occupied the countries to the East. The camp became more noticeable and therefore more of a burden on local citizens as it expanded to incarcerate larger number of inmates.<sup>15</sup>

Although the discrimination against the Jewish population in Nazi Germany grew more and more throughout the 1930s by measures such as the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935, the Gestapo did not institutionally target Jews until the Kristallnacht pogrom in November of 1938.<sup>16</sup> Over 30,000 Jewish men were arrested following the pogrom, which were the first arrests solely

---

<sup>13</sup> Gellately, 52-53.

<sup>14</sup> Hördler, 107-110.

<sup>15</sup> Gellately, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Kristallnacht, also known as “The Night of Broken Glass”, took place the night of November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1938. Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were looted, burned, and destroyed by members of the Gestapo.



because of a person's Jewish ethnicity. Once the Gestapo began to specifically target Jews, there became a need for more concentration camps to hold the growing number of Jewish inmates. The following paragraphs regarding Mauthausen concentration camp, the mass shootings in the East and the extermination camps in Poland use the sheer number of casualties of the Holocaust to illustrate the improbability that the camps and mass shootings went unnoticed throughout the war.

When Hitler acquired both Austria and Czechoslovakia peacefully, he also acquired a new population of political opponents and Jews. More Jews meant the need for even more concentration camps, leading to the creation of Mauthausen concentration camp in March 1938. The camp was built near an abandoned stone quarry three miles from the town of Mauthausen in Upper Austria. According to the classification scale created by Reinhard Heydrich<sup>17</sup> in 1941, Mauthausen was designated as the only category III camp. This category III camp was for prisoners who deserved the harshest treatment.<sup>18</sup> Despite its horrifying reputation, the SS made little effort to conceal the treatment of inmates within the camp since residents of the town of Mauthausen still had constant contact with both prisoners and the camp. An estimated 70,000 deaths took place there.

The Nazi regime conquered even greater amounts of Jews and enemies of the state (Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals, etc.) after invading Poland and the Soviet Union between 1939-1942. Before the inception of the Final Solution, the Einsatzgruppen<sup>19</sup> carried out the "Holocaust by bullets."<sup>20</sup> These killing units followed behind the German military and did much of their

---

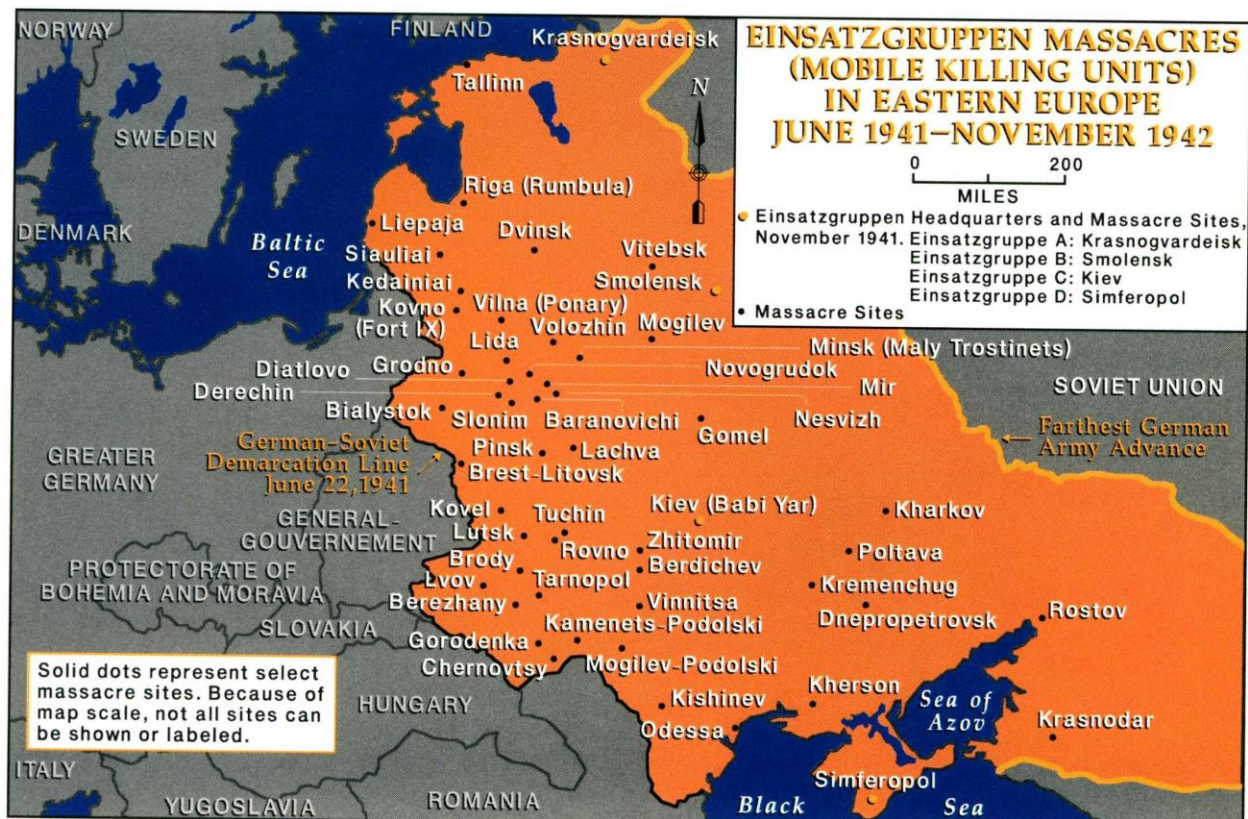
<sup>17</sup> Reinhard Heydrich was the Chief of the Security Police and Security Service (The SS).

<sup>18</sup> Horwitz, 10.

<sup>19</sup> The Einsatzgruppen were the mobile killing units mainly composed of SS and policemen assigned to kill the Jews of Europe.

<sup>20</sup> Desbois, x.

work in lands conquered from the Soviet Union such as the Ukraine and Belorussia. Enlisting the cooperation and the collaboration of local citizens and local governments, the Einsatzgruppen murdered over 1.5 million Jews in mass shootings over mass graves throughout the East even before the extermination camps of Poland were fully functional. These murders were perpetrated just outside of villages and cities, making it relatively impossible for locals to claim they had no knowledge of the fate of the Jewish population.



As for the creation of extermination camps, most historians agree the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, culminated in the execution of the Final Solution: Hitler's plan to exterminate the Jewish race. Based on the only copy of the conference's minutes that have been found, this meeting led by Reinhard Heydrich not only laid out the idea to exterminate the Jewish race, but also how it would be accomplished regarding the capture, transportation, murder, and disposal of the Jewish people. The Final Solution included the creation of

extermination camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka in the Generalgouvernement,<sup>21</sup> but public knowledge of the atrocities only grew larger as more camps were created.



As part of Operation Reinhard, the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews of South and Central Poland, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were created. Established as a labor camp in early 1940, Belzec was repurposed as an extermination camp outside of the small town of Belzec along the Lublin-Lvov railway line in November 1941. Although Belzec was only operational from March to December 1942, about 600,000 Jews perished in the camp. Sobibor extermination camp was built outside of the small village of Sobibor in Central Poland along the Chelm-Wlodawa railway line. Operational from April 1942 until the fall of 1943, about 250,000 Jews

<sup>21</sup> The German name for the occupied territory of Poland.

were murdered at Sobibor. Treblinka, the last of the Operation Reinhard camps, was originally created as a labor camp in June 1941 outside of the village of Treblinka. Treblinka's transition to an extermination camp saw its new construction in a lightly populated area near the Polish village of Wolka Okraglik, located along the Malkinia-Siedlce railway line. Somewhere between 700,000 to 850,000 Jews fell at Treblinka.

Auschwitz-Birkenau, the most infamous extermination camp, operated from March 1942 until November 1944. Auschwitz, located near the Polish town Oswiecim in Eastern Upper Silesia, was established in a sparsely populated area to avoid detection. In fact, the Nazis removed the entire Polish population within forty square miles of the camp and labeled the land as a "development zone". Even with all of its acts of secrecy, outsiders still had contact with the camp since German companies like I.G. Farben invested in the camp to secure a cheap labor force. Auschwitz-Birkenau served two purposes for the Nazi regime: to expedite the extermination of the Jews and to bring revenue and wartime products into the Reich through forced labor. Auschwitz-Birkenau claimed the lives of at least 1.1 million Jews.

The testimonies mentioned above revealing the non-persecuted citizens', those who lived both near and far from camps and mass murder sites, knowledge of the fate of the Jewish people within Nazi Germany as well as the number of casualties show there is no way the Holocaust could have gone unnoticed. However, the motivations behind the witnesses' suppression of their knowledge or their compliance differ, and understanding these differences can lead to a better conclusion of who can be considered culpable for the Holocaust.

For many non-Jewish civilians within the Reich and its territories, economic gain was a significant motive for complying with the SS and the camps' presence. For the majority of towns with a camp, barring Auschwitz because of its isolated nature, an economic boom was felt upon



the camp's establishment. The building of most camps required the need for local supplies and workers, and the SS within the camps were a new source of revenue for the towns' shop owners. The initial economic revival provided by these "camp towns" certainly motivated the locals' to see the SS and the camps positively since they brought hope to these little towns and villages. This economic upturn was temporary, in most cases, as camps became more self-sufficient and more known for their inhumane reputations, which eventually overpowered and negated the locals' motive of economic benefit.

Auschwitz-Birkenau is a unique case since this most infamous camp was also the most secluded and secret from public life. Most camp towns used prisoner labor from the camps, but the private sector including large German corporations such as IG Farben the greatest exploiter of forced labor, notably at Auschwitz. IG Farben, the German chemical giant and largest corporation in Europe at the time, was looking for a new factory site during the war. Heinrich Himmler convinced executives of IG Farben to build a plant at Auschwitz since it would be beneficial for the company as well as for the German government, a consumer of IG Farben's products. Before World War II, the company prided itself on the treatment of its employees, but the economic upside of using very cheap labor from a concentration camp trumped their company culture.<sup>22</sup> Using inmates as laborers was beneficial to IG Farben since they did not have to provide good or even satisfactory conditions for civilian workers, but rather they had access to a seemingly infinite labor force.<sup>23</sup> Auschwitz and IG Farben's agreement regarding the prisoner labor force read as follows:

A payment of RM 3 per day for unskilled workers and RM 4 per day for skilled workers is to be made for each inmate. This includes everything, such as transportation, food, et

---

<sup>22</sup> Dwork and van Pelt, 205.

<sup>23</sup> Langbein, 454.

cetera, and we [IG Farben] will have no other expenses for the inmates, except if a small bonus (cigarettes, etc.) is given as an incentive.<sup>24</sup>

Citizens were not the only entity motivated by economic gain to collaborate with the SS and the German government. IG Farben went against their company policy not because of their hatred for the Jews, but for the economic benefits they could gain by exploiting prisoner labor. The following examples distinctly show how the prospect of economic gain convinced local citizens and companies to “accept” or “allow” the concentration camps to function without much opposition.

Lichtenburg, the original concentration camp in Germany, brought economic prosperity to the city of Prettin. Upon its establishment, the camp administration quickly contracted work out to local businesses to furnish the camp, do building renovations, build a city park, and more. Stefan Hördler, a specialist on the history of Lichtenburg concentration camp wrote:

The Prettin Savings Bank 1936 annual report spoke of ‘further economic revival’ resulting from ‘the continuation of construction activity,’ increased demand for quarters ‘for the SS-Verfügungstruppen’ (combat reservists), and the presence of a ‘large guard personnel’ requiring local goods and services—increasing business and benefitting the bank.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, when Lichtenburg guards patronized the city, they met Prettin women and married in many cases leading to a social and cultural as well as an economic assimilation. This constant contact and relationship between the camp and the city’s economy certainly influenced the locals’ decision to cooperate with the SS for their own economic benefit. The perceived success of both the Lichtenburg camp and its economic integration into the city of Prettin led to its use as a model throughout the Reich and its territories.

---

<sup>24</sup> Dwork and van Pelt, 208.

<sup>25</sup> Hördler, 107.

Based off of Lichtenburg, Flossenbürg concentration camp was founded in the spring of 1938. As the population of the camp increased, SS soldiers brought their families, the town's tax revenue grew, shops improved and grew wealthier, and civilians found work in the camp.<sup>26</sup> But, unlike Lichtenburg, the town's economic gain was brief since the camp's existence stopped the growing tourist economy in Flossenbürg. The SS closed the local castle, the town's prominent tourist attraction, because one could see into the camp by climbing its tower. Once the camp disillusioned the people of Flossenbürg it was too late to change their fate. They had to live with the camp's presence until its liberation in April 1945.

Dachau concentration camp, Germany's other model camp, went through the same progression as Flossenbürg. Robert Gellately wrote about the creation of the camp, "The press in Dachau greeted the foundation of the camp as bringing new 'hope for the Dachau business world'. It was hailed as an 'economic turning point' and beginning of 'happier days' for the small town, population 8,234 in 1933."<sup>27</sup> The initial economic upturn because of the camp's creation enabled townspeople to accept the presence of the SS for the time being, but the prosperity was short lived. Gellately goes on to say the camp was essentially an autarky; it was self-sufficient once it was established and could function without reliance on the town. The townspeople's collaboration with Dachau's SS allowed the construction of the concentration camp, but public opinion of the camp changed as its reputation got out. Even in 1933, there was a saying about the knowledge of Dachau concentration camp: "Dear God, make me mum so that I don't to Dachau come." The seemingly enthusiastic public collaboration with the SS resulting

---

<sup>26</sup> Gellately, 67. The remaining information in this paragraph is also drawn from the same source.

<sup>27</sup> Gellately, 52-53. The remaining information in this paragraph is also drawn from the same source.

in a temporary economic boom transitioned to fearful, passive cooperation as the camp no longer benefitted the locals following its erection and was known for its brutality towards inmates.

This same evolution of motivation revitalized and rattled the city of Mauthausen, Austria. Economically, Gordon Horowitz stated Mauthausen concentration camp, “revived the stone industry and provided jobs for civilian workers and supervisors in the SS-owned and operated quarries. The camp passed out contracts to shippers, suppliers, and craftsmen.”<sup>28</sup> This widespread economic gain did not come without repercussions. For example, a farmer who owned property adjacent to the camp sold portions of his land to the SS camp administration and got paid well. However, he had no choice on his property but to see the mistreatment of prisoners and shootings within the camp, but his profits from selling milk to SS officers as well as getting slave laborers from time to time was enough to motivate him to look passed the terror.<sup>29</sup>

Eventually, following the same motivational process, Mauthausen concentration camp went from being the center of the town’s revival to being the town’s eyesore and epicenter of fear. Located three kilometers outside of Mauthausen, Austria, the concentration camp could not possibly avoid detection from the public. Inmates not only had to walk through the town to get from the train station to the camp, but also in order to reach their work sites every day. The main worksites for most prisoners were the Vienna Ditch and Marbach quarries, which were in the plain sight of the townspeople. A road spanned the open section of the Vienna Ditch quarry, and as Gordon Horowitz explained, “Lest anyone dare show interest or curiosity, a sign warned persons to keep moving on pain of their lives: ‘Beware! Anyone Setting Foot in the Camp Area will be Shot Without Warning.’”<sup>30</sup> The overwhelming fear of the non-Jewish locals worried them

---

<sup>28</sup> Horowitz, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Horowitz, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Horowitz, 36.



into complaisance since they knew any form of opposition could lead to their own internment at the camp. Horowitz claimed that the citizens of Mauthausen in regards to the terror of the camp “learned to walk a narrow line between unavoidable awareness and prudent disregard.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike most other concentration camps, the German government actually intended for Austrians to know of the camp at Mauthausen for this reason: the Nazis wanted the view of the camp to warn/dissuade those with resistance on their mind.<sup>32</sup> As they feared for their lives, the Austrian citizens in Mauthausen remained passive and cooperated with the SS for they simply had no other safe option.

Upon realizing the brutality of German forces, both Jews and non-Jews throughout German conquered territories were gripped by fear: fear of the SS, fear of internment, and even fear of death. When peoples such as the Germans, Poles, and Ukrainians realized the Jewish population was being targeted, many decided their families’ survival was conditional on acting out of this fear. A Jewish family that managed to escape from Belzec approached Wanda Rylska’s family, whom they knew, and asked for help. Rylska sadly stated to her interviewer years later, “If you can imagine, we only shrugged our shoulders and uttered a few words of sympathy.”<sup>33</sup> For others like the Rylska family, the threat of being taken to a death camp or killed on the spot if caught helping a Jew dissuaded them from performing even simple acts of kindness. Father Patrick Desbois, a Catholic Priest from France, conducted research in the name of his grandfather who lived in the Ukraine during the Holocaust. He interviewed the Priest of Belzec, who at age 91 still remembered going on the roof of the town’s church, with other villagers as a child, to watch the executions in the camp with binoculars. Additionally, an old

---

<sup>31</sup> Horowitz, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Gellately, 69.

<sup>33</sup> Turski, 54.

restaurant waitress in Belzec recalled that windows in the town could not be cleaned since they were so greasy with smoke from the crematoria.<sup>34</sup> It seems these Poles watched as hundreds of thousands of people were put to death, but the majority felt there was no other option; they were too scared to try to help.

This fear-induced inability to help the Jews was visible in a town near Treblinka extermination camp. Zdzisław Rozbicki remembers witnessing Jews walking from his town's ghetto to the train station where they were to be taken to the extermination camp. Jews were publicly beaten, shot, and killed during this march through the town, as Rozbicki recalled, "Many of those who had been shot called in vain for aid. The threat of death for anyone who approached them intimidated even the bravest."<sup>35</sup> Again, most Poles simply watched people die in the streets both quickly and sometimes over a period of days as the fear for their own safety trumped their will to help others. Zdzisław went on to say he did not eat and had night terrors for days after watching the horrifying parade of Jews being herded to their imminent deaths. Zdzisław Rozbicki is just one of the thousands or even hundreds of thousands of Poles who bore witness to these marches, but most of the testimonies assert the same claim: there was nothing they could do to help.

Contrary to this sentiment, although fear controlled the lives of most locals near camps and mass shooting sites, it must be mentioned that, according to research, countless non-Jewish family did exhibit acts of defiance against the Nazis and the SS in the form of helping one or more Jews. For example, the Rozbicki family hid two fugitives: one in the barn and one in their home. Even though they were a family of eight with their own adversity, the parents and children

---

<sup>34</sup> Desbois, 22-23.

<sup>35</sup> Turski, 105-107. The remaining information in this paragraph is also drawn from the same source.

still made an effort to help the hiding Jews live another day, literally. The Rylska family mentioned above brought bread and milk to their town center when they heard the Jews were being rounded up to be taken to Belzec.<sup>36</sup> Tomasz Blatt claims a lady fed him following his escape from Sobibor as previously mentioned. Whether a non-Jew provided a Jewish fugitive a single meal or a hiding spot for the night or an extended period, many of these scared gentiles did put themselves and their families at risk to try to help. Although these righteous actions heightened the level of fear of the non-Jewish families near the camps, they were carried out nonetheless proving Poles did sympathize with the Jewish people in most cases.

In the East, namely the Ukraine and Romania, the “Holocaust by bullets” killed the Jewish population according to Father Desbois. Mass shootings and graves were used in the killing of some 1.5 million Jews during the Holocaust. Testimonies of both survivors and witnesses recount not only of the Nazis’ attempts to hide the mass murders, but also the inability of the local people to remain ignorant of the killings. Zbigniew Lisowski, a Pole, testified, “Those malevolent ‘echoes of the forest’ reached us from a wooded hill near Jaszuny, ten kilometres away, where there were mass shootings of Jews.”<sup>37</sup> Some people were within visible range of the shooting pits during the slaughters. A woman named Olena from Khvativ, Ukraine, watched as her Jewish friend marched towards her death, “The more she shouted, the more I hid myself in the wheat. I was young, and I was afraid that the Germans would kill us like they were killing the Jews.”<sup>38</sup> Olena kept this unforgettable moment to herself until Father Desbois asked her to tell her story over sixty years later. When she was first asked to talk, she refused because

---

<sup>36</sup> Turski, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Turski, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Desbois, 58.

she was still afraid of the KGB;<sup>39</sup> her fear never ceased following World War II but rather transferred from the Nazis to the Soviets. The locals' knowledge of the mass murders is unquestionable, especially if the shootings could be heard from kilometers away, but the fear they could be next motivated them to cooperate with the SS.

Raul Hilberg, an early scholar of the Holocaust, argued that the ordinary citizens of Europe were neutral in the Holocaust rather than bystanders or perpetrators, stating:

The rise of neutrality as the predominant reaction pattern was, therefore, not a matter of ignorance. Rather, it was the outcome of a strategy that for the large majority of people was the easiest to follow and justify. It was a safe course, without the risks and costs of helping someone and without the moral burden of siding with the perpetrator in face-to-face infliction of hurt.<sup>40</sup>

Modern scholars argue fear also drove non-Jewish civilians to play an active role in the Holocaust. Fear motivated non-Jews to obediently work for the SS within the mass graves: digging them, packing down the bodies (dead or alive), pouring layers of sand between each volley of shots, and then covering the pits which according to Ivan Lichnitski of Novozlatopol moved for two days after the shooting.<sup>41</sup> The corroboration of multiple testimonies yield that the Germans often "requisitioned" the assistance of locals to help carry out and expedite the mass shootings of Jewish people in the East. Some people dug the mass graves and covered them; some went through the belongings of the dead to find valuables for the SS, and some cooked for the German soldiers just to name a few of the roles. These selected persons had no choice, as a woman named Petrivna from Ternivka, Ukraine, testified. She was requisitioned to help bury 2,300 Jews outside of her town. The Germans told her to grab a spade from her home and report

---

<sup>39</sup> The Russian Committee for State Security, or KGB, was the Soviet Union's main security intelligence agency and secret police.

<sup>40</sup> Hilberg, 1121.

<sup>41</sup> Desbois, 142.

back, and her mother told her, “Go, if you don’t go, they will kill you!”<sup>42</sup> Petrivna’s only motivation for helping the SS was fear, for it is unfathomable to think a child could willingly carry out the task forced upon her. If the SS was not even willing to pack down and bury the bodies of the Jews they brutally killed, how could a child have done so voluntarily? Near both the Nazi camps and the Nazi killing sites, fear played a dominant role in the actions, or lack thereof, of civilians in the area.

Lastly, antisemitism was a strong motivator for those not motivated by fear. Hatred for the Jewish people was widespread throughout the European continent well before the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Those with antisemitic fervor openly encouraged the goal of the SS and the Gestapo during World War II to subjugate and eventually eliminate the Jewish population. Instances of antisemitism in the East (Poland, Ukraine, Belorussia) are of great interest because the non-Jewish locals took part in some of the murders of their Jewish neighbors, and if they were not active perpetrators they still benefitted from the acquisition of property following the deaths of the Jews. The antisemitic-driven support from these locals in Eastern Europe both eased and quickened the process of rounding up and deporting/exterminating the Jewish population during the Holocaust.

One factor behind this antisemitism was the higher socioeconomic position of Jews. Outside of the Chelmno extermination camp in Poland, townspeople saw the fate of those unfortunate enough to be inmates, but many witnesses testified years later in the documentary “Shoah” that the Jews deserved such justice since they exploited the Poles and had all the wealth.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, when discussing the mass graves in the Ukraine, a witness Albert Emmerich

---

<sup>42</sup> Desbois, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Lanzmann, 89-90.

stated, “It was no love affair between the Jews and the Ukrainians. Most of the Jews had capital, money, and the Ukrainians were poor devils.”<sup>44</sup> Even before the Ukraine came under German control, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) had an antisemitic agenda. For example, in the summer of 1941 the militia of Litin prohibited free movement of the Jewish population in the villages of the raion.<sup>45</sup> Another local administration in the raion of Shpikov forced local Jews to wear an armband with the Star of David and to move away from the town center.<sup>46</sup>

The Ukraine is unique since local administrations spurred most of the violence against the Jewish population rather than the SS. The SS certainly gave directives to the local governments. An immediate task given to local mayors following the Nazi takeover was to create a registration list of the local population; separating the Jewish and ethnic German categories. The local administration was also responsible for redistributing Jewish property following the ghettoization or death of the Jews, which often came in the form of sales that would bring revenue into the cities. Kamenets-Podol'sk is a town in the Ukraine in which the mayor and local administration were involved in the murder of the town's 23,500 Jews. Mayor Hryhorii Kibets and the local government “willingly co-operated” with the German military upon their arrival.<sup>47</sup> Kibets' government had constant dealings with the town ghetto: giving forced labor details to inmates and allowing for the supply of hygiene products such as soap to enter the ghetto to try to prevent disease. Although there are no documents showing direct ties to

---

<sup>44</sup> Johnson and Reuband, 249.

<sup>45</sup> Name for a Ukrainian county.

<sup>46</sup> Eikel and Sivaieva, 416.

<sup>47</sup> Eikel and Sivaieva, 417-419.

the murder of the Jews of Kamenets-Podol'sk, the local administration knew of their fate and continued to support the Nazis regardless.<sup>48</sup>

Cooperation of local governments, such as in Kamenets-Podol'sk, in the Ukraine was commonplace. In the eyes of the Ukrainians, the German military liberated them from the Soviet Union. However, antisemitic ideas and actions permeated the Soviet Union often in the form of violent pogroms even before Nazism gained popularity. This outright antisemitism was an obvious motive for the cooperation and collaboration of Ukrainian citizens and governments with the SS. For others, hate and economic gain worked hand-in-hand as motivators. For example, many members of the Ukrainian auxiliary police who took part in antisemitic acts did so because it was their livelihood. Working for the auxiliary police “guaranteed job security, a decent salary, a food supply, the chance to help family and friends, exemption from forced labour deportations; and an opportunity for personal enrichment.”<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, these policemen willingly carried out their orders, engaging in atrocious acts of violence against the Jews. The Ukrainians were not the only group who cooperated with the Nazis out of their shared disdain for the Jews.

In Belorussia, the local population also harbored antisemitic sentiment. In some towns of Belorussia, the non-Jewish citizens supported the SS in their hatred for the Jews, but did not agree with the atrocities being committed. An Einsatzgruppen daily report written on August 5, 1941 reads:

There is practically no Belorussian national consciousness left in that area. A pronounced anti-Semitism is also missing....In general, the population harbors a feeling of hatred and

---

<sup>48</sup> Eikel and Sivaieva, 424.

<sup>49</sup> Eikel and Sivaieva, 425.

rage toward the Jews and approves of the German measures... but it is not able by itself to take the initiative in regard to the treatment of the Jews.<sup>50</sup>

In cases such as the one mentioned in the report above, the SS was responsible for carrying out the murder of Belorussian Jews. But, often times the citizens would voluntarily carry out the work for the Nazis.

According to witness testimonies, local police units in Belorussia were often more brutal towards the Jews than the Germans. The former police secretary of Mir stated:

The policemen could kill or beat anyone without any reason.... It was easy enough to say that the future victim was a partisan or a communist to justify themselves in the eyes of the Gendarmerie. They killed people to prove their loyalty to the German authorities. That group was very enthusiastic about the murders....<sup>51</sup>

Similar to the auxiliary police units in the Ukraine, antisemitism drove these policemen to torment and kill the Jewish population, not the commands from the SS. Just like the Ukrainians; an ulterior motive for displacing or killing local Jews was the economic benefit following their deportation or death. The collection of Jewish property following their removal was such a regular practice in the East that some local governments such as those in the Ukraine regulated it. In this case, the responsibility of the Holocaust rests on these specific murderers as well as on the SS. Therefore; the Nazi government is not the only entity that can be blamed for the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Jan Gross, known for his research on the Jedwabne massacre of Jews in Poland in 1941, emphasizes this point further believing that collective responsibility in regards to the Holocaust should not be assigned to the Nazis since each killing had its own specific, responsible murderer or group of murderers.<sup>52</sup> According to testimonies, Polish citizens killed the Jews of the town

---

<sup>50</sup> Rein, 389.

<sup>51</sup> Rein, 394.

<sup>52</sup> Gross, 89.



with little help from the Nazis. Ninety-two adult men from Jedwabne were specifically named as participants of the pogrom. According to the pre-war population of the town, that number is roughly half of the ethnically Polish male population of the village, and with the help of villagers from nearby hamlets they were able to massacre over 1,500 of the town's Jews in a single day.<sup>53</sup> The animosity shown towards the Jews could be seen through the variety of very personal killing methods such as by knives, clubs, beheadings, drowning, and the eventual burning of the remaining Jewish population alive in a barn. Bolesław Ramotowski, a witness of the massacre testified, "I want to stress that Germans did not participate in the murder of Jews; they just stood and took pictures of how Poles mistreated the Jews."<sup>54</sup> Research and witness testimonies show that many other non-Jewish Poles also willingly played an active role in the deportation/murder of Polish Jews. This indubitable fact is still being discussed in Poland today as the Polish Senate recently passed a very controversial bill prohibiting any speech that accuses the Polish state of cooperating/collaborating in the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazi regime.<sup>55</sup> The bill outrages multiple countries around the world as it goes against the facts and testimonies of witnesses and survivors; it tries to change history. Gross's findings regarding the massacre of Jedwabne are clear: the Polish citizens of the town readily carried out the murders of the town's Jewry on their own antisemitic accord. Antisemitism certainly acted as motivation for some non-Jewish civilians near camps and mass murder sites within German territories to encourage and sometimes collaborate in the murders of the Jewish population of Europe.

---

<sup>53</sup> Gross, 54.

<sup>54</sup> Gross, 48.

<sup>55</sup> The Polish bill states, "whoever accuses, publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich... shall be subject to a fine or a penalty of imprisonment of up to three years."

"Poland's Senate passes controversial Holocaust bill," BBC News, February 1, 2018, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42898882>.

Regardless of the motivation to remain complaisant or collaborate with the SS concerning the camps and mass shootings of the Holocaust, the research presented above definitively proves there were in fact witnesses to these atrocities. The notion the Holocaust was not a secret but rather an inhumanity perpetrated in the view of local citizens throughout the Reich leads to the questions asking how the eyewitnesses responded and more importantly, why?

The three most widespread and common motivations for the actions, or lack thereof, of local civilians in response to the Holocaust unfolding in front of their eyes were economic gain, fear, and antisemitism. The prospect of economic gain led many locals to cooperate with the SS by doing business with the camps and the guards within them, fear was the main reason behind the quiet complaisance of locals as the SS murdered in their midst, and antisemitism drove the locals' collaboration with the SS, especially in the East, to help decimate the Jewish population. Following this research, the question of the extent to which the role these locals with different motives played in the Holocaust is of great interest. But, the research above clearly argues the civilians living near camps and mass murder sites had different reasons for the roles they played be it the opportunity for economic betterment, a fear of the SS, or a hatred for the Jews. Last, if only one thing is to be remembered from this research let it be this: the Holocaust was not carried out in complete secrecy. The local inhabitants of the towns and villages near the concentration camps, extermination camps, and mass graves of World War II bore witness to and often played an active role in the attempted extermination of the Jewish race. They were watching.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

BBC. "Poland's Senate passes controversial Holocaust bill." BBC News. Published February 1, 2018. Accessed April 8, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42898882>.

This online article describes the recent bill passed in Poland, which outlaws any speech accusing the state of Poland of participating in the Holocaust, as well as the Israeli and Polish responses to the decree.

Johnson, Eric A., and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany: An Oral History*. Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2005.

This document contains testimonies of non-Jewish peoples following the end of World War II regarding their knowledge of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Langbein, Hermann. *People in Auschwitz*. Translated by Harry Zohn. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

This document has testimonies by the civilians who were allowed to near or enter Auschwitz. Primary and Secondary material were used in this paper for research on IG Farben and its interactions with the concentration camp.

Lanzmann, Claude. *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust: The Complete Text of the Film*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

This document contains the full text of the documentary with oral testimonies of both witnesses and perpetrators of the Holocaust. These testimonies corroborate the argument of antisemitism as a motivation for collaborating with the SS in the East.

Novitch, Miriam. *Sobibor, Martyrdom and Revolt: Documents and Testimonies*. New York: Waldon Press, Inc., 1980.

This compilation of documents and testimonies of both Sobibor survivors as well as civilians who came in contact with the camp distinctly shows the knowledge of the camp had by those both near and from it.

*Polish Witnesses to the Shoah*. Conceived by Marian Turski. Middlesex, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010.

This collection of Polish witnesses' testimonies confirms the motive of fear controlled the actions of many Poles during the Holocaust.

## Secondary Sources

Desbois, Father Patrick. *The Holocaust By Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*. Translated by Catherine Spencer. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

This study and collection of testimonies of the "Holocaust by bullets" tells a horrifying tale of the SS's use of fear to make local citizens aid in the mass murder of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe.

Dwork, Debórah, and Robert Jan van Pelt. *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996.

This document discusses and analyzes the evolution of Auschwitz from Medieval times to the present. Its discussion of the corporate exploitation at Auschwitz contains enlightening material on the relationship of German companies and the state.

Eikel, Markus, and Valentina Sivaieva. "City Mayors, Raion Chiefs and Village Elders in Ukraine, 1941-4: How Local Administrators Co-operated with the German Occupation Authorities." *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 3 (August 2014): 405-428.

This study argues the willing collaboration by city mayors and village chiefs with the Nazis. Its specific case study of the town of Kamenets-Podol'sk illustrates the role of the Ukrainian local governments in the Holocaust.

Gellately, Robert. *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001.

This work analyzes the public opinion of citizens in Germany regarding the news they've heard of the camps. Its primary and secondary material illustrates the knowledge of the camps and fate of the Jewish people throughout the Reich.

Gross, Jan. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. New York: Penguin Group, 2002.

This study looks at the Poles involved in the massacre of Jews in the town of Jedwabne. Gross sees the Poles as both victims and victimizers of the Holocaust, confirming the collaboration of Polish citizens with the SS.

Hilberg, Raul. *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Vol. 2. 3rd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

This volume analyzes the roles played within extermination camps as well as their effects. Hilberg argues neutrality of the locals near the camps was the easiest and safest course of action for witnesses to the Holocaust.

Hördler, Stefan. "Before the Holocaust: Concentration Camp Lichtenburg and the Evolution of the Nazi Camp System." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 2011): 100-126.

This article looks at the evolution of Lichtenburg concentration camp throughout the rule of Nazi Germany. Its section on the relationship between the camp and the town of Prettin shows how integrated the two entities became.

Horwitz, Gordon J. *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen*. New York, NY: The Free Press, 1990.

This work analyzes the life of civilians and private companies in the town of Mauthausen during the Nazi control of Austria. The primary and secondary material affirms the locals' knowledge of the nearby camp as well as their motives for remaining complacent.

Moorhouse, Roger. "Beyond Belief." *History Today* 60, no. 9 (September 2010): 28-35.

This article looks at the phenomenon of the "imagination gap" of citizens far from concentration camps who could not fathom the events of the Holocaust because of their disbelief.

Rein, Leonid. "Local Collaboration in the Execution of the 'Final Solution' in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 3 (December 2006): 381-409.

This article attests to the involvement of locals in Belorussia with the murder of the Belorussian Jewish population. The primary sources used explicitly state the involvement and brutality of Belorussia's non-Jewish citizens during the Holocaust.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing USA, 1996.

This atlas gives background information and provides maps regarding the various ghetto, camps and murder sites used throughout the Holocaust.